

# **The Roles of Relative, Friend, and Partner Support in Maltreating Families**

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## **Statement of the Research Problem**

Despite the fact that a substantial amount of research has suggested that the help that people receive from relatives and friends enhances their well-being and that a lack of adequate support may contribute to child maltreatment in some families, little is known about how informal support may affect parents' childrearing. Yet, the practice of enlisting the aid of parents' family members and friends into maltreatment interventions is widely accepted by child welfare professionals. Indeed, engaging parents' informal supporters in intervention efforts is often cited as playing a pivotal role in such community based treatment strategies as wraparound services, community partnerships, and family preservation. To inform child welfare professionals' efforts to incorporate informal supports into a range of maltreatment interventions, it is essential to acquire a better understanding of the ways in which support affects parenting. To this end, this study examines the roles of informal support in families who were receiving child welfare services.

## **Research Background and Questions**

Although earlier research identifies informal support as one element of individual well-being, informal support strategies have been difficult to implement as a maltreatment intervention. This is partly because there is little understanding of the ways in which support may affect parenting. For instance, does the provision of support enhance positive parenting or inhibit negative parenting? Does support affect parenting by acting directly on parents' childrearing practices? Or does support operate in a more indirect way, perhaps by improving contextual conditions that affect parental functioning?

Moreover, research examining the influence of child welfare services on parents' informal supports is scarce. For example, it is not known whether service providers' attempts to engage supporters in intervention efforts result in parents receiving more help

from their relatives and friends. Nor do we know if such change in parents' levels of support enhances their parenting.

This study addresses these questions through a series of four sequential analyses. The first analysis tests a path model hypothesizing that exposure to stressors, such as financial strain and negative life events, heightens maternal depression and thereby reduces positive and increases negative parenting practices.

The study's second set of analyses examines whether informal supports affect the individual components of the model or the relations between them. This analysis first tests a main effects model hypothesizing that mothers with higher levels of support experience significantly less financial strain and fewer negative life events, have lower levels of depression, and use fewer negative and more positive parenting practices. Then a moderating model hypothesizing that the effects of stressors on depression, and depression on parenting practices are smaller for mothers who have higher levels of support is tested.

For some mothers, partners are a primary source of support; thus, a third set of analyses examines the effectiveness of the support that was available to mothers specifically from their co-residing partners. Unlike the analyses of support received from other kinds of supporters, the analysis of partner support takes into account the influence of relationship quality on support effectiveness.

Finally, because child welfare programs intend to improve parental functioning by mobilizing the aid of informal supporters, the study examines the extent to which child welfare programs affect the availability of informal supports, and whether increases in the levels of support contribute to reducing mothers' exposure to stressors, lowering their depressive symptoms, and enhancing their parenting practices.

## **Methodology**

This secondary analysis uses longitudinal data gathered from 826 mothers who participated in the National Evaluation of Family Preservation Programs between 1996 and 1999.<sup>1</sup> The evaluation is a large-scale randomized experiment that was conducted in four states: Kentucky, New Jersey, Tennessee, and Pennsylvania. Families whose children were at risk of foster home placement were randomly assigned either to experimental groups receiving family preservation service or to control groups receiving ordinary services from the child welfare system. Families assigned to the experimental group received more intensive services. Interviews were conducted with parents at the beginning of services, at the conclusion of family preservation service or a comparable point for the control group, and one year after random assignment. This study uses data from the first and second interviews.

Several statistical methods are employed in the data analysis. First, structural equation modeling is used to assess the path model hypothesizing relationships among stressors, depression, and parenting and to test the main effects of support on each

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<sup>1</sup> The methodology employed by the evaluation is fully discussed in the study's report which is available online at <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/evalfampres94/Final/index.htm>.

component of the model. Then multiple group analysis is employed to examine the moderating effects of support on relationships between the model components. Finally, first difference models are used to determine whether child welfare services affected the availability of support, and whether change in support was associated with change in mothers' exposure to stressors, levels of depression, or parenting practices. The analysis of change consists of a set of six OLS regression equations in which difference scores in financial strain, life events, depression, negative parenting, positive parenting, and support are regressed on difference scores in the independent variables.

## Results

As hypothesized, parents exposed to more stressors experienced greater levels of depression ( $p < .01$ ) and used more negative ( $p < .01$ ) and fewer positive ( $p < .01$ ) parenting practices. Higher levels of support were associated with less financial strain ( $p < .01$ ), lower levels of depression ( $p < .01$ ), and greater use of positive ( $p < .10$ ) as well as negative ( $p < .15$ ) parenting practices. Although family preservation programs did not increase the amount of support that mothers received from friends and relatives, some mothers' levels of support did increase. This increased support contributed to reducing mothers' depressive symptoms ( $p < .05$ ) as well as improving their positive parenting practices ( $p < .10$ ).

There was no evidence that support moderated the relationships between mothers' exposure to stressors and their levels of depression. While the effect of depression on positive parenting was significantly smaller for mothers with more support ( $p = .02$ ), having more support available heightened the influence of depression on mothers' use of negative parenting practices ( $p = .03$ ). The association between higher levels of support and mothers' greater use of negative parenting practices could be attributable to uncontrolled differences in the quality of mothers' relationships with their supporters. Taking into account the quality of mothers' relationships with their partners, the effect of depression on partnered mothers' negative parenting was smaller among co-residing couples whose relationships were less conflictual ( $p < .01$ ).

Alternatively, it may be that among mothers with more support, some supporters encouraged the use of negative parenting practices. Whether supporters encourage negative parenting could not be determined from the data of this study. But if some supporters do indeed encourage negative parenting practices, then the effectiveness of relying on informal supports to improve parenting may largely depend on the characteristics of individual supporters such as their parenting philosophy and knowledge.

## Utility for Social Work Practice

These findings suggest that while informal support can be beneficial to mothers' well-being and positive parenting practices, as a potential strategy for altering negative parenting practices in maltreating families, relying on mothers' relatives and friends to provide support may be a more complex undertaking than has been previously thought. Its effectiveness may crucially depend on the individual supporter's capacity to provide

constructive parenting support as well as the quality of their relationship with the parent. Thus, child welfare professionals' efforts to incorporate informal supports into maltreatment interventions may be a complicated task of accurately assessing the parent's specific needs for support and deciding exactly what kinds and sources of support would most appropriately meet those needs.

In order to make more accurate judgments about the benefits of enlisting the aid of any particular supporter in child maltreatment interventions, child welfare workers may need to develop keen observation skills and have available sophisticated assessment tools. However, these kinds of tools and training are not yet available because our knowledge of the specific supporter traits and behaviors that influence the effectiveness of support is still too rudimentary. Clearly, more comprehensive research is needed on the roles and effectiveness of particular kinds of supports and supporters in child maltreatment interventions. In particular, systematic studies in which the kinds and sources of support and expected outcomes are clearly defined and operationalized would be especially useful.

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